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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001648

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL EUN PHUM PTER PGOV FR PK

SUBJECT: FRENCH VIEW PAKISTAN THROUGH PRISM OF AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. SECSTATE 88734

IB. ISLAMABAD 2817

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Classified By: PolMC Kathleen H. Allegrone for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

I1. (C) SUMMARY: French MFA desk officer Nicolas Bergeret told Poloff on August 28 that while the GOF is not necessarily sad to see President Musharraf depart, they hope the new Pakistani president to be elected on September 6 commits to strengthening democratic institutions and respect for the rule of law; areas "badly damaged" during Musharraf's nine-year tenure. The GOF fears, however, that if the new president fails to deliver on these points the country could fall back to the chaos and corruption of the 1980s and 1990s which could cause the military -- or somebody the GOF views as "worse" than Musharraf -- to once again take power. Bergeret said he personally believes Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Asif Zardari (widower of Benazir Bhutto) should have enough votes to take the presidency, but noted it remains unclear how strong a hold of power Zardari would have. Bergeret emphasized that the GOF believes stability in Pakistan is crucial to security and stability in Afghanistan especially when France is trying to rally support for efforts in Afghanistan among EU members. END SUMMARY.

Musharraf's Resignation a "Window of Opportunity"

I2. (C) The GOF sees Musharraf's resignation as a "window of opportunity" to strengthen democratic institutions that were badly damaged during his nine-year tenure. Bergeret recounted widely held views in the EU that seem to share in the sentiment of the title of an August 19 TIME magazine article "Good Riddance," in which Afghan President Karzai comments on Musharraf's departure. When Poloff pressed for clarification (especially with regards to points laid out in ref a), Bergeret said the GOF saw Musharraf's attempts to control all aspects of the government -- re-writing the constitution and sacking judges to consolidate power -- as counterproductive to advance the rule of law.

Stable Pakistan Contributes to Regional Stability

I3. (C) Bergeret said the GOF and EU share U.S. views on the

importance of supporting democracy and maintaining a strong relationship with Pakistan. France has a "vested interest" in the region especially in Afghanistan, he said. The GOF is worried that failure of the democratically-elected government to adequately tackle corruption, security, and the economy and instead engage in political "ping-pong" like that of civilian-led governments of the 1980s and 1990s could prompt another military coup. A worse-case scenario would be the possibility of someone "worse" than Musharraf taking power, said Bergeret. The GOF believes all international partners should work together to ensure that a government is formed, that judges sacked by Musharraf are reinstated, and respect for the rule of law is upheld. Bergeret noted the GOF believes stability in Pakistan is crucial to security and stability in Afghanistan. This is especially important as France is trying to rally support for efforts in Afghanistan among EU members.

Election Predictions

¶4. (C) The GOF was not comforted but not surprised by Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif's announcement on August 25 that the PML-N was formally withdrawing from the coalition government with coalition partner, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) (ref b). The French see Asif Zardari (widower of Benazir Bhutto and leader of the PPP) as having enough votes to take the presidency, but Bergeret expressed doubts about how effective Zardari would be as president given his history.

Comment

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¶5. (C) While the French are taking a wait-and-see approach to Pakistani government formation and the upcoming presidential election, Bergeret noted the GOF has been working closely with Germany and other EU partners to support the rule of law and good governance in Pakistan. French efforts in Pakistan remain focused on how it relates to Afghanistan, which is a top priority for the Sarkozy administration. Fallout after the death of 10 French soldiers during military operations in Afghanistan on August 18 has emboldened opposition parties to call for more restrictions on French military engagement in Afghanistan. Thus far, Sarkozy has effectively managed public opinion with a series of public opportunities to mourn the soldiers while reiterating France's commitment to the mission in Afghanistan that may have contributed to his rise in public opinion polls.

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